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ABSTRACT

Regional Educational Laboratories were created in the early 1960s as a federally funded link between research and development efforts in education and school districts. The labs were conceived to be sensitive to the practical needs of administrators and teachers for educational innovations that could be implemented locally. However, over a quarter of a century, the labs have been transformed by economic and political dynamics from a focused national network of federally supported, professionally guided knowledge diffusion institutions into nine, often entrepreneurially oriented "job shops," sometimes only remotely related to local school districts, their agendas substantially influenced by federal officials and whatever clients they could gain from marketing activities, and subsisting financially from competitively contested contract to contract. This paper describes the evolution of the Regional Educational Laboratories, paying critical attention to the governmental planning and political forces accompanying their formation. This analysis proceeds by describing the major changes in policy and operation that subsequently have shaped the laboratory system. Assumptions underlying formation of the laboratories are described, and conditions that have consistently curtailed their effectiveness are analyzed. The paper summarizes present laboratory problems and poses alternative strategies for overcoming them in the future. (JD)

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LABORATORY POLICY PAPER

REGIONAL EDUCATIONAL LABORATORIES: HISTORY AND PROSPECT

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This is one of several papers about the regional laboratory program, or functions which laboratories perform, which the Office of Educational Improvement (OERI) in the U.S. Department of Education has commissioned. The purpose of the papers is to assist planning for the 1990 recompetition of awards to operate regional laboratories. This paper has been written under contract to the U.S. Department of Education. No endorsement by OERI or the Department of Education should be inferred.

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REGIONAL EDUCATIONAL LABORATORIES:

HISTORY AND PROSPECT[1]

by
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This paper describes the hopes held for regional educational laboratories at the time of their founding, analyzes the conditions that subsequently have come to impede their effectiveness, and proposes alternative operational strategies for shaping their future.

INTRODUCTION

In the time since 1966, the federal government has allocated $422 million to establish and support a network of Regional Educational Laboratories. Despite this substantial investment of time and resources, the productivity of these organizations has consistently been curtailed by unrealistic operating assumptions, uncertain financing, and unstable performance expectations.

Even with such handicaps, or perhaps motivated by them, the nine remaining regional laboratories have curried crucial congressional support, and they are unlikely to disappear. Thus, the challenge is to enhance their effectiveness, construct a compelling mission for them, and secure sufficient operating stability to provide an opportunity for them to become an integral component of the nation's future education system.

This paper analyzes the historic development and contemporary operation of Regional Educational Laboratories in an effort to understand their strengths and weaknesses. The purpose of such an undertaking is to propose new strategies that do not simply sidestep

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[1] A paper commissioned by the United States Department of Education, January 1989. The author wishes to express his appreciation to Norman Boyan, Christopher Cross, Emerson Elliott, John Evans, Francis Ianni, Francis Keppel, Michael Kirst, Hendrik Gideonse, Charles Stalford, and Emily Wurtz for the information they contributed and for their constructive criticisms. All interpretations and recommendations are the complete responsibility of the author.

past problems, but, more forcefully, enable these organizations to chart a productive future course.

The paper contain three major sections. The first describes the evolution of the Regional Educational Laboratories, paying critical attention to the governmental planning and political forces accompanying their formation. This analysis proceeds by describing the major changes in policy and operation that subsequently have shaped the laboratory system.

The second section describes the assumptions underlying formation of the laboratories and analyzes the performance expectations and structural conditions that have consistently curtailed laboratory effectiveness.

The final section of this paper summarizes fundamental present day laboratory problems and poses alternative strategies for overcoming them in the future.

A Caveat

At least one caveat is in order before proceeding with the above-described sections. This essay examines only a component of the nation's educational Research and Development (R & D) strategy. Readers should understand, however, that many of the impediments to effective operation of the Educational Laboratories are generic, inherent in the federal government's overall R & D strategy, and cannot be overcome in a piecemeal manner. The federal government's educational research and development strategy was constructed twenty-five years ago. It has not been systematically revisited since. Many of the assumptions underlying that strategy have changed significantly. Changes are called for and certainly can be made that would render Education Laboratories more effective. However, it is clearly time to assess existing arrangements and undertake necessary alterations to the *entire* R & D system, not simply the Regional Educational Laboratories.

Part One:
Inventing Educational Laboratories[2]

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[2] This history is interestingly told by Stephen K. Bailey and Edith M. Mosher in **The ESEA: The Office of Education Administers an Act** (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1966).

Education was a strategic component of the Johnson administration "War on Poverty" and Educational Laboratories were an important element in that strategy. In July of 1964, in order to prepare for his anticipated first full term in office, LBJ formed a presidential task force chaired by John W. Gardner. The charge to this blue ribbon panel was to develop a package of education reform ideas to be submitted to Congress shortly after Johnson's inauguration. The Gardner Task Force, among its many recommendations, proposed that Educational Laboratories be established as a vital link in the chain of knowledge generation and diffusion. The idea was eventually incorporated into Title IV of what was to become the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Eduction Act (ESEA).[3]

Educational Laboratories were a logical component of an artfully conceived ESEA legislative package. The ESEA came to be known as education's first "billion dollar baby"[4] and Johnson's political tacticians[5] wanted to ensure that it passed Congress intact and quickly. Thus, the bill's five major components were intended to serve the nation's educational needs and simultaneously attract support from a diverse array of political factions whose historic inability to reach accord had previously prevented passage of any major education bill.

Title I was the glittering ESEA policy star with a carefully crafted entitlement formula that distributed federal funds to states in a manner which was educationally ingratiating and politically ingenious. The congressionally approved ESEA formula aided wealthy northern, as well as poor southern, states, but it did so by directing federal funds to children from low-income households. The association between household income and education level was strongly made in congressional testimony and, thus, the ESEA was designed as a major federal instrument for interrupting the cycle of individual and household poverty. The funds were funneled to local school districts through states, but such was seen as a mere technical formality. It was a federally conceived, federally administered, and federally funded program, and no one had any doubts about it.

ESEA Title II authorized federal funds for the purchase of textbooks and other instructional materials. Title III provided funds directly to local school districts to enhance their effectiveness through development of exemplary and innovative projects. Title IV will be

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[3] Most of the remaining components of which were combined in 1981 into the Education Consolidation Improvement Act.

[4] See the article by this name in the June 1966 Atlantic by Elizabeth Benner Drew.

[5] Namely, Francis Keppel, Wilbur Cohen, Douglas Cater, and Samuel Halperin.

discussed further below. Title V provided federal funds to strengthen state education departments. This latter was justified on grounds that ESEA programs would impose major additional administrative burdens upon states, and they would have to be buttressed if they were effectively to assume their new duties.

Title IV amended the previously enacted (1954) Cooperative Education Research Act. This program had funded education research on a project-by-project basis. Generally, these research topics were proposed by professors. There was little opportunity for federal officials to shape the nation's education research agenda. Moreover, it was difficult to impossible to gain a critical mass of research on a nationally significant topic or sustain research in a field once initiated.

The new Cooperative Education Research Act, ESEA Title IV, authorized formation of Research and Development Centers and Educational Laboratories. These were envisioned as a network or chain of new institutions that would be capable of revitalizing American education by generating useful research results and infusing them into the nation's elementary, secondary, and college classrooms. These various federally funded centers and laboratories would compensate for the previously described weaknesses of agenda fragmentation and lack of research momentum. They would be federally established and federally funded. However, they were expected eventually to become self-governing and be tightly tied to the needs of their clients, primarily school districts and schools.

Title IV was a scientific and technical component of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. Titles I and II were directly operational and would immediately assist local school districts; Title III was an incentive or stimulant to local school districts to become more effective. Title V was administrative, intended to buttress the managerial capacity of states. Title IV was included to generate and diffuse new knowledge regarding learning and instruction. The initial recipients of Title IV funds were the nation's researchers. Eventually, however, it was thought that research results would benefit students in schools.

The "R & D" strategy constructed by Johnson administration education planners envisioned universities and newly invented Research and Development Centers as residing close to the "basic" or "pure" science end of the research continuum. These institutions were to engage in systematic inquiry about fundamental components of learning and instruction. Research and Development Centers were to specialize on fundamental dimensions of the education

process—reading, mathematics, writing, testing, evaluation, and so forth. The outcomes of the research and development efforts then were to be carefully shaped and conveyed to school districts and schools through "Educational Laboratories." These new institutions were intended to be unusually sensitive to the practical needs of administrators and teachers and would be able to interpret research results from R & D centers and tailor them for local implementation.

New education-related knowledge was conceived as existing on a continuum wherein it was generated in R & D institutions and subsequently implemented by end users such as schools. The shaping of R & D results to make them attractive and useful to practitioners was to be undertaken by Educational Laboratories. These new agencies were conceived to be analogous to Agricultural Extension Field Agents widely thought to be effective in disseminating new growing techniques and products to America's farmers. Another model were the national laboratories relied upon by the Atomic Energy Commission to translate basic research findings of physicists into the practical applications of atomic energy intended to benefit the entire nation.[6]

In order successfully to follow the national physics laboratory or extension agent models, Educational Laboratories would have to recruit unusually able professionals who not only could identify R & D ideas worthy of diffusion, but who also could gain and hold the respect of school practitioners to whom they would attempt to distribute ideas and products.

Educational Laboratories were believed to be crucial for such a knowledge dissemination and implementation function because there were few other similar organizations then in existence. State Education Departments, prior to the implementation of ESEA Title V, were notably weak. Independent policy analysis centers, such as have now evolved in twenty-two states, did not exist. National organizations capable of distributing information, such as the Education Commission of the States and the National Governors Association, either did not exist or had little interest in education. Private sector and not-for-profit consulting firms were few in number. In short, there was little by way of a service infrastructure upon which American education could depend for the generation, distribution, and implementation of new knowledge. Educational Laboratories were intended to fill the void.

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[6] The Atomic Energy Commission National Laboratory idea was intended to convey the notion of fiscal magnitude. These physical science laboratories have huge budgets.

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Trouble: From the Beginning, And More

However thoughtfully conceived, Regional Educational Laboratories were launched on a troubled sea. Many of the crucial assumptions underpinning their formation were unrealistic or were soon to be undermined, and that made it difficult for these infant organizations to meet the performance expectations held for them.

Second, an originally unintended element of "distributive politics" quickly emerged. Pork barrel dynamics became a concomitant element when "Regional" was added to Educational Laboratories. In the booming, buzzing, chronologically compressed confusion of congressional budget deliberations, what was to be twelve became twenty.[7] However, the appropriations level remained almost constant and nowhere near the huge dollar amounts annually allocated to the archetypes of R & D, the Atomic Energy laboratories. This made it difficult to shape and polish a prototype of the newly conceived institutions by concentrating a critical mass of resources and attention upon a relatively small number of developing organizations.

Third, because of fiscal decisions, the number of Educational Laboratories was subsequently reduced to seventeen, and then to nine. No doubt sensing a similarly bleak financial future, some of the remaining laboratories began to develop entrepreneurial strategies for stabilizing their budgets. However successful for a particular laboratory, these individual fund raising efforts were not always consistent with the initially conceived mission as knowledge brokers serving local school districts.

Fourth, the basic knowledge brokering strategy was eventually altered in a manner which diluted sensitivity to school district interests, injected a larger element of organizational uncertainty into laboratory operation, and impeded the ability to appraise laboratory performance. In 1972, the management of Educational Laboratories was transferred to the newly established National Institute of Education (NIE).[8] In order to exercise greater program discretion, NIE negotiated a series of five-year agreements in which laboratory projects were specified contractually. At this point, a virtually self-regulating

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[7] Confusion still exists regarding the number of Laboratories initially envisioned by Johnson administration officials. There were advocates for a relatively small number of Laboratories that, even if regionally located, would serve a national constituency, not a set of states. At the opposite end of the continuum were Office of Education advocates for as many as 50 Laboratories, one in each state.

[8] Subsequently to be reincarnated in its current form as the Office of Education Research and Improvement (OERI).

professionally propelled network of client-sensitive knowledge-brokering institutions was shattered.

Finally, the last components of the mid 1960s-conceived R & D plan were diluted with the 1985 rebidding of the laboratories. This was the first time in the almost twenty years since the laboratories' formation that a complete national competition would be held. There were three important outcomes.

Laboratories could no longer assume that they would last indefinitely as individually operating organizations. They could be made to compete for their continued existence and their agenda could be strongly shaped by federal officials. Second, the number of laboratories was reduced to the smallest level yet, nine, with many of the remaining laboratories now having to cover a larger geographic spread of constituents. Third, laboratories were now directed to devote a significant portion of their budget to projects operating "with and through" other agencies, such as state education departments, in order to assist local school districts. This latter idea was a realistic recognition that given existing resource levels, laboratories could not reasonably be expected to assist all local school districts in their regions. However, "with and through" was vastly different than the direct and client-sensitive school district relationship that was originally envisioned for L laboratories.

Thus, almost a quarter century following their formation, Educational Laboratories had been transformed by economic and political dynamics from a vision of a focused national network of federally supported, professionally guided, elite status, knowledge diffusion institutions, charged with developing close client relationships with school districts, into nine, often entrepreneurially oriented, "job shops," sometimes only remotely related to local school districts, their agendas substantially influenced by federal officials and whatever clients they could gain from marketing activities, and subsisting financially from competitively contested contract to contract.

What had happened?

PART TWO
Invalid Assumptions

Regional Educational Laboratories were conceived, and subsequently brought into operation, based on at least seven crucial assumptions that have subsequently been difficult

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to support. Several of the assumptions were contained in authorizing and reauthorizing statutes, others in the U.S. Office of Education and Department of Education regulations and guidelines which were used to shape the laboratories initially and reshape them ever since. Each of these assumptions is described and analyzed below.

Fulfilling a Federal Agenda

Regional Educational Laboratories were conceived in an era when the education reform agenda was primarily federally initiated. The "Great Society" of the Johnson administration assuredly extended beyond education initiatives, e.g., the Civil Rights Act, the Economic Opportunity Act, and Model Cities. However, education reform was a central feature of the LBJ domestic program. Perhaps more important, the ESEA represented a momentous symbolic breakthrough. To that point in time, federal education efforts had been severely restrained.

The 1958 Sputnik-inspired National Defense Education Act was precedent-shattering, but not precedent-setting. Its narrowly conceived academic intensification programs for math, science, and foreign language were not long-lasting. Spectacular American space successes in the 1960s and 1970s eroded its justification, and it had only a minimal long-term effect on school policy or practice. Vocational education was the only education dimension on which there had been a substantial federal presence over time. However, little of significance had spread from vocational education to the day-to-day operation of schools.

Thus, the significance of the ESEA. It not only authorized unprecedented levels of federal financing, but also, its substantive provisions encompassed a wide spectrum of schooling purposes and reached multiple levels within America's schooling system. Because of its political popularity and scope of purpose, proponents of a powerful federal role envisioned the ESEA as only an opening salvo in a wider war against educational inequality and ineffectiveness. The 1965 ESEA had overcome historic political opposition and contributed to the formation of an influential coalition of educationally predisposed interests. Surely more federally inspired education improvement was to come. The enactment in 1966 of expanded federal roles for higher and vocational education only fueled these expectations.

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Savoring the experience of the ESEA's enactment, the National Education Association (NEA) subsequently went on record advocating that the federal government support at least a third of the total national costs of schooling. New schools needed to be built, teachers deserved higher salaries, racial segregation needed to be abolished, rural education needed buttressing, handicapped and non-English-speaking students needed added assistance, all students needed to know more about other nations, and so on for a long list of national education needs. The nation needed to be rebuilt and improved schools were a crucial part of the foundation.

Educational Laboratories were to be an important component of the educational change effort that was to be led by federal officials. New instructional practices, new teaching techniques and materials would be gathered nationally, or invented in the federally funded Research and Development Centers, and then translated for school practitioners by the laboratories. These new institutions would be a vital link in packaging useful knowledge and transferring it from national sources to local schools. The national change agenda for the laboratories to follow was envisioned as being established by federal interests. In that few if any similar institutions then existed, it was necessary for them to be federally initiated and federally funded.

This notion of a logical chain of educational change was undermined initially by the Vietnam War which fostered cynicism about the Johnson administration and its social programs, stifled national idealism, and cast a budgetary pall over domestic spending.[9] The Nixon administration did not share the vision of nationally inspired educational change, and the Carter administration was too overwhelmed by world events and OPEC-initiated inflation to do anything more for education than make symbolic gestures.[10] Mid 1960s flaming enthusiasm for federally led education reform had been reduced to a few smoldering embers of hope by 1980.

Historians can debate the degree to which the 1980s were revolutionary. However, regarding one dimension there can be little disagreement. President Reagan did not envision the federal government as a major operational force in education. His Education Department officials became extraordinarily adroit in using the national visibility of their

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[9] Gerald Ford approved Public Law 94—142, the **Education for All Handicapped Children Act**. However, this was not a highly visible piece of his administration's program. It was primarily a congressional and interest-group response to court decisions that threatened to impose an unbearable fiscal burden upon states and local school districts.

[10] Such as upgrading the United States Office of Education to cabinet level status.

office to make pronouncements regarding the need for educational change. However, the notion that the federal government would itself develop the specifics of an agenda, provide operational details, and pay a large part of the bill was dealt a punishing blow.

Regional Laboratories, regardless of their performance to that time, were not viewed by Reagan officials as an integral instrument for promoting federally inspired educational change. Other actors, primarily governors and state legislators, business leaders, chief state school officers, and teacher union officials, were now rising to assume leadership, and Educational Laboratories had their mission altered to serve them. Serving a federal agenda, one of the crucial original purposes for the Educational Laboratories, had disappeared. In this transition, a crucial question was seldom forcefully posed.

Could specialized institutions, initially established to further a focused federal agenda, be productively transformed into a set of regional agencies intended to provide a spectrum of services to a wide variety of state and local clients?

There is Knowledge Worth Brokering

Regional Laboratories were originally conceived as brokers. They were to serve as middlemen in a chain linking knowledge *producers* and knowledge *users*. Researchers would invent new educational techniques and Educational Laboratories would translate and sell them to teachers and educational administrators.

Embedded in this linking concept were at least three crucial assumptions: (1) knowledge existed or would be produced that could materially enhance instruction in local schools, (2) Educational Laboratories would have personnel capable of identifying the needs of school districts and subsequently locating useful solutions to their problems, and (3) Educational Laboratories would possess or develop a quality control capacity, both about ideas and personnel, that would guide self renewal and enable them to adapt to changing conditions. All of these assumptions are arguable.

Useful Knowledge Existed. Instructing effectively is among the most challenging of human undertakings. To date, little that is genuinely scientific is known about teaching and learning. For virtually every school of thought that develops about education, a countervailing view or advocate emerges, and a successful synthesis seldom occurs.

Teaching continues to be far more of an art or a craft than a science. The consequences of this condition have diluted the ability of Educational Laboratories to fulfill their purposes.

The United States annually spends $300 billion on education and it is a matter of great national importance. Consequently there are enormous public and professional pressures to identify more effective educational strategies and techniques. Educators are generally accepting of means and materials to improve their performance. However, in the absence of scientifically grounded principles to guide the search and adoption of new procedures, schools are vulnerable to short-lived fads that wash over them with discouraging regularity and leave little of a productive residue behind.

In the time since the Educational Laboratories' inception, the education community has flirted with widely touted reforms such as Program Performance Budgeting Systems (PPBS), Leaner Verified Materials, Individually Prescribed Instruction (IPI), Computer Assisted Instruction (CAI), Program Evaluation and Review Techniques (PERT), Competency Based Teacher Education (CBTE), Management by Objectives (MBO), merit pay, career ladders, educational "bankruptcy," and "Effective Schools." All of these have so far proved to be illusory as widespread strategies for educational enhancement. On the horizon is seemingly always another promising strategy that, finally, will dramatically revolutionize education. It never has.

Some day there may be a set of sufficiently proven instructional inventions to justify their widespread adoption in schools. To this point, however, the research and development effort for American education is so severely limited that it is difficult to imagine that a scientific breakthrough will occur soon. Regardless, at the time the Educational Laboratories were conceived, it is not clear that the then-existing research and development base justified their formation as knowledge brokers. It is no more clear that such a role is justified today.

Assessing Needs and Picking solutions. Determining the knowledge needs of school practitioners is relatively easy. One can visit schools, talk to teachers, examine test results, utilize surveys, and employ a variety of other avenues to compile a list of needed techniques and materials. Identifying effective solutions is far more difficult. Little thought appears to have been given to the manner in which solutions would be selected or to the training of individuals who would be the brokers.

Assuming that the nation's research and development effort was expansive and effective, it would still be no easy task to select reform ideas that were best suited for individual school settings. It would necessitate a cadre of skilled research brokers in laboratories. Such knowledgeable research-practice brokers did not exist when laboratories were founded, and little has been done subsequently to develop a pool of them.

The most able individuals in laboratories often have been socialized to academic research norms, not local school districts' practices. When an opportunity presents itself to return to the environment in which they were trained, e.g., accept a professorship, they frequently take it. When performed well, knowledge brokering is an exacting role. To date, there is little by way of a career niche for laboratory personnel, and, the ability to identify prospective solutions to practitioner problems likely suffers as a consequence.

Quality Control. Professional norms and peer review prevail in many scientifically or technically based settings. Private-sector brokers are controlled to a degree by market forces. However, Educational Laboratories have little by way of a peer culture or professional norms upon which to rely. Immediate feedback from clients is also difficult to obtain. In that laboratories in large measure are now funded by a higher level of government to serve intermediaries who are assumed eventually to serve schools districts, there is only a diluted a market mechanism to provide direct feedback regarding performance. Initially this problem was envisioned as being solved by the remarkably high calibre professionals who were assumed to be employed by laboratories. However, uncertain funding and eroded status began to take its toll on the ability of laboratories to develop and retain a large cadre of unusually professional translators of knowledge.

In the absence of conventional quality control mechanisms, or an intensely developed professional culture, laboratories conduct an endless round of self-evaluating and outside assessment efforts. Many of these are accurate and insightful. However, from their beginning and continuing to this day, the Regional Educational Laboratories are missing a sustained means for assessing whether or not they are performing a genuinely useful role. They have a contrived and frequently ineffective feedback loop, and this is a difficulty which has existed from their conception.

<u>An Initial Development Phase.</u>

Johnson administration education officials knew that the invention of a new educational institution could not easily occur overnight and that experimentation would be necessary. It was not expected that Educational Laboratories would be an immediate success. A period of trial and error development was envisioned. However, political and budgetary pressures coincided to render such assumptions impractical.

Early Office of Education planning emphasized gradual expansion of laboratories, perfecting the model, polishing the functions they would perform, and thoughtfully recruiting and training personnel to work in them. The laboratories were to be fashioned carefully. However, two events rendered these plans inoperative. First, Johnson administration education officials disagreed among themselves on the number and nature of the laboratories and several of them acquiesced to arguments for political success and agreed that the laboratories could be regionally located to serve every geographic segment of the United States. Once the notion had been aired, there was little recourse but to launch the new organizations as Regional Educational Laboratories.[11]

Since there was now to be a laboratory in every region of the United States, there was little justification for opening only a few and then slowly expanding the number. If a development phase was in order, then the "development" would be necessary everywhere. Otherwise, the lessons learned in one region might not be the right thing to learn in another. Every geographic sector had to have a laboratory and they had to have it from the beginning. An unfortunate "pork barrel" image was initiated.

Organizational and Resource Stability

A related problem was and has continued to be financial and regulatory stability. It was initially assumed that federal funding would provide the overwhelming proportion of operating funds for Educational Laboratories. Whatever additional money they needed would result from the sale of products and services, related to knowledge brokering. (It was school districts that were envisioned as the primary markets for the sale of these "products.") There were few discussions initially regarding repeated or cyclical competitive bidding for laboratories. In effect, these new institutions were to be arms of

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[11] The Atomic Energy Commission national laboratories, major models for the Educational Laboratories, were located in various regions of the United States. However, it was widely understood that each AEC laboratory, whatever its geographic location, served national purposes. This distinction appears not to have been put forth with sufficient force in the instance of the Education Laboratories.

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the federal government's education interests, and, thus, would be sustained the same way the Agricultural Extension agents or Atomic Energy Commission National Laboratories were funded.[12]

Also, laboratories were to be protected from rapidly revolving regulatory changes so that over time they could develop vision, purpose, and productivity. This kind of stability would enable laboratories to carve out for themselves a productive niche among the network of America's educational institutions.

These assumptions were invalid virtually from the point of Laboratory formation. Money was a root problem. By the time the Great Society was scheduled to shift into high gear, the Vietnam War was becoming exceedingly expensive. Domestic spending levels initially envisioned for the "War on Poverty" were never realized. Even in the Nixon administration, the projected "Fiscal Dividend" for domestic programs which was to result from a Vietnam withdrawal did not occur. Nixon's budgetary officials were unusually creative in pursuing money-saving techniques such as budgetary "Impounding," whereby the president simply refused to approve expenditures even though Congress appropriated the funds.[13] Congress eventually devised means for overriding residential spending reluctance, but by then it was too late. Inflation and mounting federal deficits began to place both the executive and the legislative branch in a more frugal frame of mind when it came to social programs.

Education under Carter had to struggle mightily to stay abreast of double-digit inflation. Little else emerged during the 1970s. Reagan administration budget proposals did not even seek such annual increases. Thus, during their quarter century history, Regional Educational Laboratories have never benefitted from stable funding, let alone the substantial resource levels initially envisioned to support their early development. The period of planning, pilot testing, experimentation, and polishing was never to be. Regional

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[12] Competition is held periodically to determine the management of the national laboratories, now funded by the Department of Energy or the Defense Department. However, these rebidding efforts seldom involve a wrenching alteration of mission or revision of purpose.

[13] It was during this period that education interests groups swallowed organizational differences of opinion and formed the **Emergency Committee for Full Funding.** Their strategy was to lobby Congress to override executive branch spending curtailment. It became evident that education funding would always be a problem, not simply a short-term emergency, and former Washington Senator Warren Magnuson convinced educators that "full" funding was a practical impossibility. Thus, today the organization is known as the Committee for Education Funding.

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Educational Laboratories, once established, were thrown into the arena of competitive budgetary politics and immediately expected to produce tangible results.

By the late 1970s laboratories and R & D Centers occupied such a large proportion of the NIE budget that federal education officials saw themselves as having virtually no resource discretion to meet emerging national research needs. They could not respond, except by attempting to focus R & D Center and laboratory attention on a problem. This contributed to an evolving regulatory environment which placed ever tighter constraints around laboratory purposes.

Because of the inability to predict resource levels, Regional Educational Laboratories seldom have sufficient stability to pursue a sustained course of action. Many laboratories, and particularly some of those that are judged as successful, have had to become entrepreneurial. They bid competitively on service, evaluation, and consulting contracts in their regions and elsewhere. They seek grant funding from foundations. With the necessity for finding outside funding, money to augment federal appropriations, they have to fragment their professional educational efforts to accomplish activities which may not be squarely aligned with a knowledge-brokering agenda.

Being entrepreneurial is not all bad. Financial instability can sensitize laboratories to markets in a manner that full federal funding might not do. What, then is the problem? Enterprise has its virtues, but the market place may not adequately reflect the greatest need for laboratory services. Educational organizations with the financial resources to seek outside consulting and evaluation services may not be the agencies most in need of Regional Educational Laboratory assistance. For example, it is seldom school districts, particularly small ones, that have the resources to pay for outside help.

Federal funding uncertainty and changing views of the federal role also contributed to alterations in the regulatory environment of Regional Educational Laboratories. Through monitoring procedures and periodic rebidding, laboratory purposes began to slide from the original Johnson administration academic/technical knowledge brokering model to a more opportunistic consultative model. The latter was made particularly explicit with the most recent insertion of the Reagan administration "With and Through" strategy whereby laboratories were also expected to assist school districts by cooperating with and operating through other agencies. The initial assumption of laboratories as a direct link between

knowledge producers and knowledge users, classrooms, schools, and school districts, had now been substantially altered.

Resource instability also stimulated Educational Laboratories to engage in bold political activities to sustain federal funding. By forming an organization, the Regional Laboratories and R & D centers could act in concert to represent their views before Congress. The employment of an unusually able executive director permitted this umbrella organization to make its case to Congress, frequently with more force than the executive branch Department of Education officials who supposedly were overseeing R & D Centers and Regional Educational Laboratories. These overt political efforts were successful in providing what little budgetary stability laboratories enjoyed. However, politicization did little to reassure the broader research community that the laboratories were worthwhile based on the quality of their professional research, development, and dissemination results. Indeed, politicization and competition for scarce federal funds drove an unproductive wedge between the larger educational research community and the Regional Laboratories, the very groups that were supposed to be joined together by the original enabling legislation.

Task Specialization.

Initially it was assumed that Regional Laboratories would specialize. Prior to the invention, or political imposition, of regionalization, each developed laboratory would carefully select a curriculum area or instructional strategy in which to become expert. Recruitment of personnel and the honing of procedures would render a particular laboratory the place for school districts to come when plagued by the special problem on which the laboratory concentrated. Over time, laboratories would be able to build a reputation as brokering knowledge in specific practical fields, e.g., reading, writing, mathematics, special education, gifted and talented youngsters, bilingual education, and vocational education.

Task specialization was made difficult by two developments—regionalization and the need to engage in entrepreneurial activity. If a laboratory was to serve a region, then it had to develop a full portfolio of those dimensions of interests to "clients" in its geographic area. Laboratory employees would now have to cover several bases, not simply become expert in one.

Additionally, enterprise demanded that laboratories respond to the markets available to them, regardless of their specific initial agenda. Enterprise by itself might still permit specialization. However, the mixture of enterprise and regionalization meant that laboratories had to develop a portfolio consistent with the market place and foundation interests in their region. They could not easily risk specialization and playing in a national market on only one dimension. Task specialization was no longer a valid assumption virtually from the day regional laboratory funding competitions were announced.

Being Part of a Synergistic System

Regional Educational Laboratories were originally conceived of as only one of several specialized constellations in a galaxy of research and development strategies. In addition to research efforts in universities and federally funded Research and Development Centers, Educational Laboratories would be complemented by a substantial program of field-initiated studies wherein individual researchers and research teams would also be federally funded to conduct inquiry about a wide range of fundamental and applied education problems.

Over time, primarily because of the above-described funding difficulties, individual components of this research and development spectrum became badly eroded. Funding for universities has been diminished substantially, R & D centers have been reduced in number and funding, and field-initiated studies remain only in a symbolic sense. To be sure, new agencies have evolved since the inception of Educational Laboratories, e.g., many more private and not-for-profit consulting firms, university-based policy analysis units, and the Education Commission of the States. However, these were not originally envisioned and they certainly are not now woven into a federally coordinated infrastructure in the manner that Educational Laboratories and the other R & D components were originally supposed to be.

In effect, the entire education Research and Development strategy conceived by Johnson administration planners has dissembled. No new overarching strategy has been designed to replace it. Only fragmented components of the original plan remain, and they are unable to meet the challenge. Regional Educational Laboratories continue, and so do R & D centers. However, these institutions now are expected to carry virtually the nation's entire education research and development burden and they are ill suited to the task, both in concept and resources.

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Direct Links to School Districts

The original conception of Educational Laboratories envisioned their serving as direct links between knowledge-producing agencies and school districts. This never occurred in the manner initially planned because of many intervening conditions, not the least of which was uncertain funding. However, the Reagan administration's adoption of the so-called "With and Through" strategy made it clear that direct linkage between laboratories and local school districts was eroded. "With and Through" may have been a realistic recognition of what was possible. After all, there were only a limited number of laboratories and fifteen thousand school districts. Multiplying laboratory efforts by cooperating with other change agent institutions was certainly logical. However, this alteration had another consequence. It also diluted a major feedback loop regarding laboratory performance.

Now that laboratories were to operate "with and through" other agencies, their effectiveness could not be as easily and directly appraised. An indirect operating strategy substantially reduced the prospect of a local school district administrator or teacher accurately being able to identify a Regional Educational Laboratory as a source of useful ideas, techniques, or materials. Regional Educational Laboratories were like stealth bombers. State education departments, county offices of education, state school board or administrator associations, or teacher unions might be the agencies in most direct contact with local school districts, and Educational Laboratories would be sufficiently far in the background as to be invisible on school district "radar screens." Evaluation became the more difficult as a consequence.

Part Three
Alternative Strategies for the Future

Proposing an entire new education Research and Development strategy, however badly needed, is beyond the scope of this essay. The following planning and operational alternatives are restricted to Regional Educational Laboratories. These proposals are intended to overcome three fundamental laboratory problems: (1) an ambiguous "mission" resulting from almost a quarter century of policy neglect and regulatory accretion, (2) insufficient resources to accomplish whatever purposes emerge, and (3) the absence of a forceful evaluation mechanism or performance feedback loop.

The proposed strategies involve altering one or a combination of policy-related dimensions, e.g., federal funding levels, specified clientele, subject-matter specialities, and performance incentives. Like the plans laid almost twenty-five years ago, these proposed strategies are also predicated upon crucial assumptions. These are made explicit below in order to enable readers better to assess the utility of individual alternatives.

Assumptions

Not only are Regional Educational Laboratories likely to continue, they also are likely to continue in their current configuration. That is, the laboratories will be "regional." However many of them there is to be, their responsibilities will provide complete territorial coverage for the United States. Looked at another way, each laboratory will continue to have a geographically designated constituency.

Federal funding, at least in the next four to eight years, will be insufficient to permit laboratory expansion, and may prove insufficient even to sustain current levels of effort. In most geographic regions, additional financial resources will be necessary.

Economic and political conditions are unlikely ever to extend to Regional Educational Laboratories the long-term funding stability of research universities or many other public educational institutions. Therefore, some of the organizational consequences of uncertainty, such as turnover among high-level laboratory personnel and periodic redirection of purpose, should systematically be anticipated.

State governments will continue for the foreseeable future to be the primary agenda-setting agencies for American education.

Alternative Strategies for the Future

Given that many of the original hopes for Regional Educational Laboratories have proven impossible to realize, and the educational policy landscape has been altered substantially since their inception, what realistically can be undertaken presently to render these institutions more effective? Seven alternatives are proposed below:

Status Quo. Of course, muddling through with the current set of arrangements is always one possibility. In the event agreement cannot be reached for changing

laboratories, not all is lost. Several of the existing institutions are judged to be effective for their region, and over time, thoughtful monitoring and careful managerial attention might strengthen the weaker laboratories. However time consuming this strategy might be, it would have the virtue of attempting to salvage the large investments already made. If this strategy is distasteful to laboratory proponents, it should be assessed relative to the alternative of eliminating Regional Educational Laboratories altogether.

Elimination. Would it be better to eliminate Regional Laboratories altogether? They have been unable generally to meet the expectations initially held for them. Evaluations reveal an uneven set of current performances. They absorb a remarkable proportion of the slender amount of education research and development funding available in the United States. Perhaps the appropriate answer is simply to perform institutional triage and redirect their financial support to other endeavors and agencies, such as the Research and Development Centers or field initiated research.

Of course, not all laboratories would have to be eliminated under this strategy. Selection could be made of the three or four least effective laboratories; they could be closed or phased out and their resources reallocated to the others. Geographic boundaries would have to be redrawn to maintain complete national coverage. One's position on this proposal might be influenced by knowing the probability that Regional Laboratory funding could in fact be redirected or, would simply be utilized to satisfy demands for reducing the overall federal budget deficit.

Entrepreneurial Intensity. Several Regional Educational Laboratories already engage in substantial entrepreneurial effort in order to enhance their budgets. This is a mixed blessing. It has the potential disadvantage of seducing laboratories into less-than-crucial activities, or at least activities that are less than crucial for promoting greater effectiveness in school districts. This is particularly the case because local school districts seldom have the financial resources to contract for services of the nature that laboratories can offer. On the other hand, when laboratories subject themselves to market competition they gain a measure of the degree to which their services are desired by potential consumers. Entrepreneurial activity does provide a feedback loop that frequently is otherwise missing. Also, entrepreneurs are forced to become sensitive to the needs and views of clients. Inappropriate bureaucratic procedures and organizational indifference are frequently reduced.

One strategic alternative is to sustain "With and Through" tactics and utilize entrepreneurial incentives to enhance the prospect that laboratories are performing useful functions for regional clients. All laboratories would be encouraged to supplement their funds by competitively bidding for grants and contracts within their geographic service areas. Annual federal funding levels could be reduced, over time, and more laboratories could be formed with the savings.

Explicitly acknowledging, indeed, deliberately intensifying, entrepreneurial activity by laboratories would have several advantages. It could spread federal resources more widely than now is the case, even offering the prospect of initiating additional laboratories. It would provide a more forceful evaluative dimension than presently is possible. It would enhance the probability that laboratories were indeed sensitive to the needs and outlooks of the clients they attempt to serve. Last, it would substantially supplement the range of consulting services available in some regions of the United States where large national private and not-for-profit agencies currently maintain only a minimal presence.

An intensified entrepreneurial strategy would have obvious disadvantages. It might do little to bring laboratory services directly to local school districts. "With and through" disadvantages would unlikely be corrected. Additionally, laboratories would, in effect, become "Job Shops." In time there might be little to distinguish them from profit and not-for-profit consulting firms, with all the advantages and disadvantages that such agencies exhibit. In major metropolitan areas of the United States, there is already a sufficient number of such agencies, though there probably is no harm in adding a few more to the marketplace. However, in less well-developed regions, having a full-service consulting agency would probably be an advantage over what currently is available.

Entrepreneurial activity could be mandated through regulation. Additionally, it could be encouraged by using federal funding on a matching basis. For example, for every $4 that a laboratory raised entrepreneurially, it would receive $1 in federal matching funds, up to a specified ceiling amount.

Service Credit Accounts." This strategy offers a means for intensifying "With and Through" tactics, enhancing laboratory sensitivity to client needs, ensuring relevance to contemporary educational developments, and, when linked to a resource matching strategy, expanding funding available to laboratories. The following scenario offers one illustration

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of the manner in which a "Service Credit Account" strategy might operate. Other scenarios are also possible.

This procedure would encumber Laboratory resources for use by designated clients. Within each geographic region, laboratories would have "Designated Clients." These might include, or be limited exclusively to, one or a combination of individuals and organizations such as chief state school officers, governors, legislative leaders, state school board associations, or major professional educator interest groups. A laboratory's designated client or clients would be allocated a "Service Line of Credit" which could be drawn upon for consulting, policy analyses, research, or staff development during the course of the budget year.

These service allocation arrangements could be intensified, and constructed to provide a performance feedback loop, by requiring that designated clients match federal funds in their individual Service Credit Accounts. Matching need not be on a dollar-for-dollar basis. Almost any reasonable matching ratio suffices to gauge the extent to which designated clients believe the service is of value to them.

Designated clients would specify the general nature of services they would expect during the forthcoming contractual period. These discussions would facilitate laboratory planning and personnel recruitment. Prior agreement would also be reached regarding the "rate" at which laboratory services would be billed against a client's line of credit.

"Service Credit Accounts" and the accompanying concept of "Designated Clients" would also have advantages and disadvantages. Laboratory sensitivity to clients' needs would be intense. Performance feedback would be facilitated, particularly if financial matching requirements were instigated. Laboratory stability might be further enhanced by the added degree of political support that could result from such arrangements. Excessive indirect overhead costs could be minimized by specifying the proportion of federally funded resources that had to result as direct services to designated clients. Advanced planning with clients would enable laboratories to know with greater assuredness what their personnel needs would be, at least for a year, and, depending upon the planning horizons involved, perhaps as long as a multiyear federal contract cycle.

An additional advantage of the "Service Line of Credit" is the renewed possibility of attracting added actors into laboratory rebidding competitions. Restricting the prospective

clientele of laboratories, would probably reduce the range of their substantive responsibilities. Under a "Line of Credit" arrangement and fewer clients, laboratories would not have to spread themselves as thinly as has been the case in several past instances. Greater specialization might facilitate higher quality performance. Also, a narrower band of expectations might reasonably encourage a wider range of other agencies to compete for laboratory funding when rebidding was scheduled.

The disadvantages are those accompanying an even a more intense version of the "With and Through" strategy. For example, designated clients might monopolize such a large proportion of laboratory resources, unless otherwise protected by federal regulatory agreement, that small clients would be neglected. Also, the "Service Credit" strategy runs the risk of unproductively entangling laboratories in state and regional politics. Lastly, clients now benefitting from laboratory services might view the "Service Line of Credit" as a contrived encumbrance which simply makes their lives more complicated without providing additional advantages.

Specialized Think Tanks. Yet another strategy is deliberately to encourage Regional Educational Laboratories to become specialized "Think Tanks." The above-described "Service Credit Account" would likely reduce the spectrum of clients for laboratories. A "Specialized Think Tank" strategy would likely reduce the substantive spectrum for which any particular Laboratory is responsible. A laboratory would specialize in one or a restricted range of topics consistent with federal directives, regional needs, or a combination of the two.

For example, state officials appear to desire greater policy analytic services. Regional Education Laboratories could specialize in the provision of this service to states in their geographic area. Similarly, a laboratory might specialize in future planning for a region, cyclically undertaking a variety of demographic, economic, personnel and financial projections. Yet another example is a laboratory that specialized in program evaluation and became known for providing high calibre assessment services to regional clients. Lastly, a laboratory might specialize in activities such as strategic planning, business systems, testing, or instructional improvement for states and large-scale education organizations within its service area.

Enough has been said to this point regarding advantages and disadvantages of previously described strategies that additional detail is perhaps superfluous. Suffice it to say that

restricting laboratory substance offers an opportunity to gain high performance through specialization. Accountability might also be enhanced because the range of expectations for a particular laboratory would be reduced. Substantive specialization could also be accompanied by federal matching requirements so as to encourage entrepreneurial activity, expanded fund raising, and client accountability. The disadvantages would include diminished contact with operating school districts and a narrower spectrum of knowledge translation.

Combination Strategies. The above-listed strategic alternatives are not necessarily mutually exclusive. It is possible to combine many of them. For example, entrepreneurial activity and matching requirements can be utilized in most every instance. Similarly, restricting functions and designating a smaller spectrum of clients can also be accomplished simultaneously.

Part Four:
Conclusion

What is the "right thing" to do about Regional Educational Laboratories? The answer to this question will depend heavily upon the perspective of the respondent. However, it is difficult to respond objectively in the absence of an overarching federal government education research and development strategy. Such a strategy was constructed a quarter century ago. It has not been systematically revisited since. The conditions of American education have been altered sufficiently that a previously developed strategy, even if there were a current-day desire to pursue it, is no longer appropriate. What is needed is a high-level review, undertaken cooperatively by the education community and appropriate government officials. In the absence of such a set of full deliberations, this essay offers alternative strategies, probably interim ones, for productive future deployment of Regional Educational Laboratory resources.